‘Measuring a plant doesn’t help it to grow’: Teacher’s perspectives on the standards agenda in England.

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the findings of two studies focused on teachers' perspectives on the standards agenda. The original study was carried out in 2010-2011 and published in 2015 in Education 3-13 (Brown and Manktelow, 2015). The study was replicated in 2019 using the same methods to see if perspectives had changed almost a decade later. Q-methodology was used with UK primary school teachers to find commonalities of perspectives across the sample that may not have been apparent had more traditional data collection methods been used. The findings show that there remains a variation in perspectives on whether the standards outcomes provide constraint or flexibility. Teachers continue to hold negative positions and are frustrated by the importance placed on Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs). There was more resistance in the 2019 study to how the standards agenda has been translated into policy and the impact the tests have on children, especially those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The paper concludes by critiquing the enduring use of SATs and suggests that the standards outcomes need to be rebalanced by focusing first and foremost on the wellbeing of all children.

Keywords- standards agenda, teachers, primary, education.

The standards outcomes that changed primary education

The standards agenda in England has dominated education policy and rhetoric since the 1970s. Contemporaneous economic and social problems were associated with failings in education, among other areas, which was strongly criticised as failing to prepare young people for the world of work. Chitty (1989, 14) stated that the 'external economic circumstances connected with internal bureaucratic dynamic… [inspired] a widespread belief that education should be geared more closely to the economy'. In their campaign, the Conservative party, and their leader Margaret Thatcher, consistently drew on a discourse of crisis, which after their general election victory in 1979 was used to justify plans to change the education system radically (Quicke, 1988). Notorious slogans such as 'Educashun Isnt Wurking' highlighted what was presented as a breakdown in the education system and the rest of society which could only be reversed by significant change. This was symbolised most clearly in education by an emphasis on the need to raise standards. Since this time, an enduring and unrelenting focus on standards has effected a 'profound transformation' in the

education system (Hursh, 2005). The policy shift towards developing individuals' skills in order to meet economic objectives represents a significant change in the ethos of education, as Hursh (2005, p.5) has identified:

> Because employability and economic productivity become central, education becomes less concerned with developing the well-rounded liberally educated person and more concerned with developing the skills required for a person to become an economically productive member of society.

The introduction of the Education Act (1980) and, most significantly, the Education Reform Act (1988) heralded the introduction of this new, more competitive ethos among schools, promoting market-led, public-facing change in the education system based on neoliberal performativity and accountability (Galloway and Edwards, 1991).

It is important to note that, although its election in 1979 has been widely regarded as a key transitional point in politics and policy in the UK and in England in particular, the marketisation associated with the standards agenda and neoliberalism was only tentatively introduced by successive Conservative governments before the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Chitty, 2014). Before briefly outlining the objectives and consequences of this key piece of legislation, it is important to identify the double focus on which neoliberalism is founded. Neoliberalism has been defined by Harvey (2005, p.2) as:

> A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong property rights, free markets and free trade.

Mason (2019, p.67) has captured the centrality of standards and measurement to neoliberalism, describing it as 'a system of performance, a kind of ritualized theatre. Performative behaviour is easy to standardize and measure in market terms'. Neoliberalism marked a shift from classical liberalism by applying market principles to the state itself (Hindmoor, 2018), while at the same time also attempting to restrict its effects. The ERA (1988) is an example of this, reflecting what Bernstein (2000: 87) described as a 'decentred market' in which changes associated with marketisation and standardisation are stabilised 'by

recontextualising *selected* features from the past to stabilise the future through engaging with contemporary change'. Neoliberal education policy in England in particular (other UK countries, notably Scotland, have been more resistant) has attempted to restrict its increasingly market-driven approach by reinstating elements of traditional pedagogy and curriculum, often to counter the extremes associated with a rather vaguely defined progressivism (Chitty, 2014). However, as Whitty and Power (2002, p. 105) have highlighted, these impulses of marketisation and traditionalism are 'both complementary and contradictory'. This was clear as early as the ERA (1988) which purported to increase school autonomy through the introduction of local management of schools (LMS) to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This reduced local authority oversight at the same time as attempting to maintain standards and traditions through the implementation of a National Curriculum, a national testing system and school inspection services. The movement of (apparent) local autonomy and increased national control was a result of the wider opening of the public sector to marketisation and competition and emphasises that the standards agenda was both part of neoliberal reform and an attempt to limit some of its consequences (Jopling, 2019). This paradox lies at the heart of the reforms to education system in England introduced by successive UK governments from the 1980s and the challenges they have faced in meeting their objectives. In this paper, the data collected draws out the effects of this paradox on the primary curriculum and the teachers attempting to teach it.

The standardized curriculum

Alongside the changes already outlined, the ERA (1988) extended changes in the Education Act (1980) which had already reduced teachers' responsibility for designing the curriculum and ability to use their professional judgement with regard to standards (Gunter 2008). These outcomes enabled the Government to control classroom content, whilst continuing "steering at a distance" (Whitty, 2008, p.166). The newly developed National Curriculum significantly linked curriculum breadth to *traditional* subjects in primary schools. Nine prescribed subjects were identified and teachers were provided with guidelines on what and how to teach (Harnett and Vinney, 2008).

The relationship between the Government, schools and teachers became more hierarchical and schools and teachers were expected to implement national outcomes. The *Better Schools*

White Paper (DES, 1985) had already made teachers more accountable for their performance and given the Government more control of the curriculum on a national scale. Ball (2008) states that this paper disempowered teachers by removing their ability to make important decisions in their curricula through centralising both curriculum decision-making and assessment processes. Research on teachers' professional identities has found that the standards agenda had a significant impact on the profession in that teachers' professional status depended on their adhering to and achieving the standards outcomes (Carlgren, 1999). Teachers' unions and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were also displaced in the process as the Government took over all of these outcomes.

Competition, accountability and SATs

The subsequent assessment framework was developed by the Task Group on Assessment Testing (TGAT) and was initially based exclusively on teacher assessment. However, in 1991, the Parents' Charter was introduced, giving parents the right to information about their local schools based upon their performance. The basis of parental knowledge was twofold, through use of a public assessment process and also inspections of individual schools. Summative assessment results at the end of each key stage, named Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), were used to develop a national form of assessment. For primary schools this meant at this time English, Maths and, initially, Science tasks in Key Stage One, and SATs in English, Maths and Science in Key Stage Two.

SATs results were first published in 1992 in national league tables that compared schools' success, introducing high stakes accountability to the primary phase at a stroke and placing schools in direct competition with one another. Schools were and remain ranked on league tables according to the proportion of children who achieve the expected level (Higgs *et al.,* 1998*).* The Education Act (1992) also instituted the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), a non-ministerial department which was required to undertake intermittent external assessment of schools to ensure that they were adhering to standards outcomes (Brown *et al.,* 2002; Gillard 2011). The Education Act (1992) envisaged 'improvement through inspection', which aimed to use inspection to enhance schools' public accountability for their actions (Chapman, 2002).

The outcomes of SATs and Ofsted inspections became used by government to judge school and teacher success (Yarker, 2006). The Department for Education (2011) described this as an 'information revolution', in which parents were able to access information about schools and make informed decisions about which school they would like their child to attend. However, Stevenson and Wood (2014, in, Pratt, 2016, p.892) state that this also resulted in "tighter and more specific versions of 'outstanding teaching' which are policed by an inspection system in which the driving mechanism is the assessment of pupils' test outcomes".

Refinements of the standards agenda

Successive governments continued to focus on the need for standards, accountability and academic success in education. This was signalled by the incoming Labour government in 1997 with its 'standards not structures' slogan (DfEE, 1997), which was criticised for becoming more prescriptive than its Conservative predecessors through the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy strategies in 1998 and 1999, which changed the curriculum timetable and focused half of all teaching time on literacy and numeracy (DfES 1998, 1999). Although these restrictions were later relaxed to broaden the primary curriculum, not least because initial attainment gains in SATs not sustained (Lupton & Obolenskaya, 2013), the standards agenda continued to dominate, even as policies promoting a broader approach to educational achievement, through policies like *Every Child Matters* policy (DfES, 2004) and the introduction of contextual value-added (Leckie & Goldstein, 2017) to measurements of school performance. The latter policies were among the first to be removed by the Coalition Government as part of their reinvigoration of standards-based school reform when it took office in 2010. For instance, the Education Act (2011) purported to help teachers raise standards, to improve underperformance in relation to these standards and strengthen the ways teachers were held accountable for their actions. It also promoted the development of a self-improving school system founded on increasing school autonomy, significantly reducing the role of local authorities, massively expanding Labour's relatively small-scale academies programme by requiring schools regarded as under-performing to become academies funded directly by government, and allowing the creation of free schools (Department for Education 2012). Following this, a review of the National Curriculum, intended to facilitate economic success as well as raise standards led to changes which encouraged teachers to use the National Curriculum as an outline of core knowledge, while also purporting to allow them the

autonomy to plan exciting, engaging lessons based on the National Curriculum outline (Department for Education, 2013). However, the rhetoric of autonomy coexisted uneasily with the constraints of the national curriculum, SATs, league tables and Ofsted inspections, which continue to dominate primary education. Pratt (2016, p.892) notes that

> the mantra of successive governments has been the need to 'raise standards'; in effect to ensure that test scores rise for 11 year olds… The result has been a school system, and particularly an assessment system that has become increasingly techno-rational in outlook. English teachers teach within a tightly controlled set of parameters, some made explicit in national curricula and national strategies, and others implicit - but no less real for teachers - in the way pupils are regularly tested and the results used to make judgements about both learning and teaching.

Research on the standards agenda has predominantly focused on the conformity and constraints of its outcomes, emphasising the detrimental effects of the outcomes on teachers and schools. This is particularly the case in the limited research investigating teachers' perspectives on this agenda. Criticisms of the standards agenda include the focus on narrow parameters of success in SATs, having to 'prep' children for SATs, difficulties with the time-consuming nature of the SAT process, focusing them solely on academic achievement and feeling forced to conform to the outcomes (Fieldings et al. 1999; West, et al., 1994; Wyse and Torrance, 2009). Bowers (2004) found that his teachers felt they had little room to make their own decisions in any aspect of the standards outcomes. In some of the publications teachers highlighted that children's achievements can lie outside of the curriculum and academic achievement. Harnett (2008) found that teachers in their research were committed to providing a broad and balanced curriculum but also emphasised the need for children to be happy and to enjoy learning. Throughout the standards agenda years there has been some resistance by teachers, including boycotting some of the tests, but this has not changed the outcomes (Tomlinson, 2001, in, Hursh, 2005).

Teachers' positions on the standards agenda: the original 2010-2011 study

Data collection for the original study was carried out in 2010-2011, the study completed in 2013 and key findings were published in *Education 3-13* in 2015 (Brown and Manktelow, 2015). It investigated 25 teachers' positions on the standards agenda in six mainstream

primary schools in three different Local Authorities in the West Midlands. The study's sample included two schools in affluent locations, two in low socio-economic locations, one Catholic and one Church of England primary school. Teachers in the study varied in the years they taught and the length of their teaching experience. It contributed to knowledge at the time at it moved the debate on from solely focusing on criticising the outcomes. The study used Q-methodology to be able to investigate the complexity of participant's perspectives on a given subject. This meant that their perspectives could be explored in detail. It used a card-sorting technique which means that every statement can be considered in relation to one another (qualitatively and using a factor analysis process) and therefore participants' overall perspectives and commonalities in perspectives can be thoroughly explored (Combes, *et al.,* 2004) (see methodology).

The original findings focused on two groups of participants that had opposing perspectives. The first group included 14 teachers' perspectives, mainly from Years 3 upwards, which reflected other research (e.g. Bowers, 2004; Fielding et al., 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009) that focused on conformity of the outcomes. The group was entitled 'I have to conform to the standards agenda even if I personally disagree with it (Brown, 2013). In contrast, the second group included 11 teachers, mainly teaching up to year three and they found some flexibility and autonomy in the outcomes. This group was entitled 'I don't agree with all of the standards outcomes; however I can use my professional autonomy in their implementation' (Brown, 2013). There was an evident divide in these groups based on which years they taught: teachers who taught the higher years found more constraint in the outcomes. However, these findings saw a move towards some teachers considering the outcomes to be 'guidelines' more than a source of constraint.

There were also some consistent findings across these two groups that are important to note in this paper. The majority of teachers (17 out of 25) revealed clear division between the Government's and their own definition of success. They disagreed with the ideological concept of the standards agenda and therefore did not believe in the core reasoning behind the implementation of all its outcomes. They focused on their disapproval of how they are measured as successful teachers. The majority of teachers (17 out of 25) also believed that SATs were given more emphasis than any other measure. For these teachers, SATs produced inaccurate data on children's educational progress and did not measure pupil, teacher and school achievement adequately. For instance, one participant said in her report that the

dominance of SATs overshadowed all other success in schools: 'Go on any course, read any government view "the school is marvellous because … level 5s"'. She went further to say that she believed it was a case of 'silk purses and sows' ears!' because we cannot make good quality assessment of schools using bad quality tests.

Teachers in the original study measured their own success in ways that lie outside the SAT process, seeing success in relation to how their children had developed during the year. In doing so, their approach to success was much more individualised and measured personal development, without any focus on the national level. Teachers emphasised the need for children to be happy and enjoy learning and they chose to highlight individual progress outside academic study. For instance, one participant stated that children can be 'gifted in other areas, for example art, dance, drama, music, PE, sport…' Another concluded that 'a good teacher ensures a child received a holistic, well-rounded education that equips them to deal with life'.

The paper describes a study carried out in 2019, almost a decade after the original research that investigated teachers' positions on the standards agenda and its effects on their practice. The study used the same methodology to see if perspectives have changed and to consider critically whether we are moving or held back by continuing to use the same standards outcomes in primary schools.

The study's methodological design

The second study had two main objectives, which again were the same as the original study. First, it sought to investigate the views of practitioners on the standards agenda. Second, it aimed to investigate practitioners' perspectives on the inclusion agenda. This paper focuses on the study's first objective, which had the following research questions:

- What are practitioners' perspectives on the standards agenda?
- Is it effective according to teachers' perspectives and does it support the achievement of all learners?
- Have perspectives changed in almost a decade?

The second study investigated 32 teachers' positions on the standards agenda in 5 mainstream primary schools in three different Local Authorities in the West Midlands. The study's sample included one Church of England school in an affluent location and four academies in low socio-economic locations. Teachers in this study also varied in the years they taught and the length of their teaching experience. The sample size was similar to the original study. In this study, most of the schools involved were academies, whereas in the original study there were no academies as they were relatively rare in the primary phase at that time. This form of purposive sampling was not intended to produce a comparative study, but was directed at gaining a wide selection of possible mainstream primary schools and teachers. Access difficulties meant that the sample contained less variety in terms of school type and socio-economic location than hoped.

The intepretivist focus of these studies was on the participants' positions, acknowledging that these positions and one's actions can alter over time and can be dependent on situational circumstances. Findings can then be compared and contrasted between different periods of time or between different places (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). Q-methodology was deployed because it is a means of gathering quantifiable data from highly subjective viewpoints (Brown, 1997). Q-methodology investigates the complexity in different participants' positions on a given subject where differences of opinion are expected (Combes, *et al.,* 2004). Q-methodology is a way of thinking about research that focuses on providing subjectivity to participants. This approach to research enables an exploration of shared meaning through consideration of the social context in which participants find themselves (Kitzinger, 1999). Q-methodology involves participants sorting a set of statements onto a distribution grid, shaped as a reversed pyramid. Participants sort these cards based on whether they agree or disagree with each statement. The distribution went from -4 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). As such, participants are comparing and contrasting the statements − there is no right or wrong response in the card sort (Brown, 1991/1992).

In both studies the methodology and the way the data was collected was the same, except in the original study post Q-sort interviews were also carried out but this was not possible in the second study due to access issues and time restraints. In total, teachers in both studies sorted 48 statements covering the standards agenda outcomes alongside the ideological need to include all mainstream children in activities. These statements were compiled from the

literature that offered a wide spectrum of personal and professional positions. They were then reviewed by two academics who are specialist in this area before main data collection commenced. The only change in the second study was to change 'Special Educational Needs' to 'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities' to reflect current terminology. These statements included, 'I believe that if all my class do not achieve the 'national average' they are failing in their education' and 'I feel that I am part of the process within implementation of this initiative and therefore I am responsible for its success'. There were a few statements in which some changes were made to the terms used, for example, to reflect shifts from p-scales to s-scales and from statementing to Education, Health and Care Plans. However, instead of changing these statements, participants were informed that the statement had been retained from the original study and that they needed to consider them in light of their current practice.

To enhance the qualitative data collected during the card sort in both studies, participants were asked to describe on a report sheet why they had placed statements in the most extreme distribution columns. Direct quotes from these report sheets are included in the group's interpretations. The distribution data was then analysed qualitatively and also quantitatively using the PQ method, which is a computerised method of inputting data and producing factors, known as 'groups' in this paper (Eden, Donaldson and Walker, 2005). The groups in this study represent commonalities in participants' positions on the standards agenda outcomes.

Validity and ethical considerations

Cohen and colleagues (2011) believe that qualitative researchers should describe validity in terms of how far their research is able to detail participants' positions. Considering qualitative research in its entirety, validity is improved in four different ways – with the use of a pilot study; self-description; peer debriefing; and triangulation.

The British Education Research Association's (BERA) (2011) ethical guidelines indicate that researchers need to disclose all relevant information regarding their research, prior to it being conducted. This study ensured that participants signed a written consent form that detailed all relevant research information, prior to their participation in the research. Additionally, in order to ensure confidentiality, information was not disclosed that could readily identify the

participants. To ensure anonymity in the report of this study participants have been identified by number not name.

Findings: teachers' positions on the standards agenda in current practice

In total, three groups were kept in the second study for interpretive analysis and are detailed in this paper. There were seven groups generated that had the relevant strength of group to be kept in the analysis. Many Q researchers retain groups (factors) that have an eigenvalue of 1.00 or higher, which was the case for these seven groups. The eigenvalue represents the strength of that group in relation to others. However, when looking at the amount of participants in each group it was decided that each group needed at least five participants' perspectives. This was to ensure that each group included a sufficient number of participants and was not based on the perspectives of only one or two participants. The groups in this study represent 25 of the 32 teachers included in the analysis. Seven of the participant's perspectives did not load on any one group as they not have enough commonalities in their perspectives with the rest of the sample.

All of the teachers in these groups held strong perspectives on the standards agenda and had negative perspectives particular on the use of SATs. The titles of these groups focus on the differences in perspective amongst these groups.

Group one: I do not believe that the standards agenda is my priority; however I can find autonomy within its outcomes and believe that the school system can be inclusive for all.

In total 7 teachers developed this group. Demographic details are listed in Table 1. There was an eighth teacher who was loaded onto this group, but they have the exact opposite perspective. This is known as a bipolar perspective. Interestingly, this teacher taught Year 6 (participant 32, female, 10 years' experience). The rest of the group mostly taught in Key Stage 1.

Table1. *Group 1's demographics*

Participant	*Female/Male/Other*	*Year taught*	*Years' experience*
4	Female	Early years	2

13	Female	Year 2	12
19	Female	Year 3	20
20	Female	Year 2	10
22	Female	Year 4	2
24	Female	Year 5	12
29	Female	SENDCO	?

Teachers in this group believed they held a contrasting perspective on standards to the government. They strongly agreed that the Government believes that to be a 'good teacher' teachers should contribute to their school's achievement in the league tables (36; 5) and agreed that more emphasis is placed on SATs than any other objective (42; 3). They disagreed that in their opinion to be a 'good teacher' the most important aspect of their job is achieving in the league tables (35; -4). Participant 29 strongly stated her perspective in the report sheet:

> The standards agenda dominates the school system. It is grounded in a bell curve system that is designed to fail a significant minority of children (usually the most vulnerable… of our society) and elevate an equally significant number of children- the privileged… I have problems with national averages because they are a social construct, politically motivated: 'lies damn lies and statistics'. Yet they have devastating impact on the lives of real people. Test results can lead to suicide or SEMH difficulties.

Participant 4 also emphasised that outcomes such as the league tables should not be "used as a political tool". They did not agree that SATs should be seen as important for all children and a measure of educational success. Participant 22 stated "the emotional, social and mental wellbeing of the children in my care is of far more value to me than their academic success". They strongly disagreed that children are failing their education if they do not achieve the 'national average' and disagreed that it is of paramount importance that children achieve academically (47; -2). Participant four stated that "children may make accelerated progress and still not meet the 'national average'. Education should focus on individual achievement rather than attainment". She added "striving to achieve an ever increasing national average is skewing EYFS profile data".

They felt pressure to try and fulfil the agenda (26; 2) and a moral obligation to achieve its outcomes (28; 3). Participant 22 detailed the pressure felt to not let her school down:

> I believe that highly unrealistic targets are set for children and that they undergo undue stress and anxiety to achieve them. This stress and pressure is also relayed to staff and it is NOT healthy or fair. I believe that there are other ways to assess and monitor both schools and children without the level of stress, pressure and expectation.

Participant 24 added:

> The process of statutory assessment in EYFS, KS1 and KS2 can often cause a huge amount of stress on children, families and staff. It seems to be getting worse rather than better. It also unfairly values certain subjects certain skills, certain amounts of progress and overall certain 'types' of children (labelled in different ways) as more important than others.

While they disagreed that there was too much flexibility (34; -2) they did feel they had some autonomy in implementing the outcomes. They disagreed that they have little choice in how they are implemented (39; -3) and feel part of the process in implementing these outcomes (32; 2). Participant 4 stated that the outcomes 'provide guidance'. Participant 20 added "There needs to be standards for teachers to follow of course, but it needs to be more flexible to allow for inclusion and a sense of achievement for all". They agreed that they had had adequate training (24; 4) and enough practical experience to achieve the outcomes of this agenda (41; 3). They disagreed that there is a lack of support from school (21; -2) but agreed that there was a lack of support from their LA (20; 2) and that they needed more allocated time to implement the agenda effectively (23; 3).

They also disagreed that SATs tests are worthwhile for every child (7; -4) and did not agree that they should focus more attention on children who could achieve the national average (43; -3). Participant 19 said "I do not think that children should be judged on their academic success. We are all individuals and have different talents and that should be recognised. You do not have to be academic to achieve in life". Participant 20 stated: "the system of assessments and league tables isn't working, it never has. Measuring a plant doesn't help it

to grow, and it can make our children who don't 'measure up' in the eyes of the government feel inadequate". Many of the teachers in the group chose to state that they do not believe children with SEND should have to take part in SATs. Participant 13 stated that "Statutory assessment is not appropriate for all children. Testing can lead to lack of confidence and self-esteem for children with SEND". Participant 20 stated "it really feels that the government pressure of targets etc fails SEND children. I have taught many who feel like failures and give up because they can't write, but have so much else to offer. They just have different intelligence that can't be measured in the statutory assessment, so they are 'lost'". For these teachers, the standards agenda is not a barrier to inclusive practice. They agreed that children with SEND can be fully included in every aspect of the schooling experience (14; 4) and disagreed that every child in this initiative cannot be fully included (10; -2). They believe that children with SEND do not hinder the education of the rest of the class (12; -3) and feel that the school system adapts to accommodate children with SEND (16; -2).

Group two: I believe that teachers should be accountable to standards and all children are considered within the outcomes, but there are multiple barriers to its implementation.

In total 5 teachers developed this group. Demographic information can be found below. There were no consistency in this group regarding years taught or years' experience. Table 2….

Participant	*Female/Male/Other*	*Year taught*	*Teaching experience*
1	Female	Year 6	17 years
9	Male	Year 4 (1-6 PF)	4 years
11	Female	Year 3-4	5 years
16	Female	Reception	4 years Declared SENDCO
28	Female	Reception	14+ years

Teachers in this group had a more favourable perspective on the standards agenda. They felt it was necessary for the school to be accountable to external inspection and the assessment process (45; 3). Participant 9 stated "teachers are accountable as in every job. Standards are there for a reason. It is to ensure the job is completed to the highest possible standard by the individual". Participant 11 reiterated this by saying "that all professionals engaging with

children need to provide the best education and support to allow them to progress". They disagreed that more emphasis is placed on SATs than any other objective (43; -4) and in their opinion to be a 'good teacher' is not to achieve in the league tables (35; -2). Interestingly, they were the only group to not agree that in the governments opinion to be a 'good teacher' is to achieve in the league tables (36; -1). However, participant 9 did comment in his report sheet that he disagrees with the academic approach in schools. He said "each child learns in different ways. A purely academic approach is not suited to all. Most children leave primary school without other skills". Many of the qualitative comments in their reports also demonstrated frustration with the SATs process. Participant 1 said, "As a school with a high number of pupils with SEND, we do get frustrated at times as they are judged against their peers in standardised tests. Many of our SEND shine in others areas and make huge progress emotionally and socially. This is harder to judge and demonstrate progress quantitatively as data is more qualitative".

They also strongly agreed that all children are considered within standards outcomes (5; 5) and that the school system adapts to accommodate children with SEND (16; 2). Participant 11 did however state that "SEND children are often not included or treated/classed as a separate group" but she agreed that they should be considered by the outcomes. They strongly disagreed that SATs tests are worthwhile for every child (7; -5). Participant 11 added "…not all children are able to access testing which can have an effect on their mental and academic progress/development". The group felt a moral obligation to fulfil the standards agenda outcomes (28; 4). They agreed that their position had been influenced by their experience (30; 3) and the government (31; 2). They did not agree that the responsibility for this agenda should be placed on the government (17; -2) and did not feel underacknowledged by the government (29; -2). They too felt pressure to try and fulfil the outcomes (26; 2) and felt torn between their personal and professional opinion (27; 2). Their perspective has also changed through practical experience (44; 2), yet they agreed that they had obtained enough practice experience to achieve the outcomes of this agenda (41; 3). They did however disagree that government legislation provides them with good guidelines (1; -2).

The group did however choose to highlight a number of barriers to implementing the standards agenda in practice. They agreed that there is a lack of support from their LA (20; 4), they needed more time to implement the outcomes effectively (23; 3), they don't have

enough resources to include children with SEND (13; 2). They also disagreed that they have had adequate training (24; -2), the p-scale (or subsequent add-on system) is of benefit for children with SEND (33; -3) and there is enough funding within the school to implement the outcomes (22; -3). Participant 28 said "funding is poor in schools at the moment. We do not have resources we need for staff".

Group three: The standards agenda is full of constraints. There are many barriers to implementing standards outcomes.

In total 12 teachers developed this group. Demographic information can be found below. All of these teachers taught in years up to year four or taught across all years. They ranged in teaching experience.

Table 3…

Participant	*Female/Male/Other*	*Year taught*	*Teaching experience*
5	Female	Nursery	3 years
6	Female	Year 3-4	2 years
7	Female	Year 4	10 years
8	Female	Year 3	1 year
12	Female	All	33 years
15	Female	Year 4	1 year
17	Female	Year 1-2	12 years
18	Female	All	11 years
21	Male	All	15 years
27	Female	Year 3	6 years
30	Female	Year 1	0 years
31	Female	Year 2	26 years

Teachers in this group significantly emphasised the constraints they felt in implementing the standards outcomes. They agreed that in the Government's opinion to be a 'good teacher' is achieving in the league tables (36; 4). They felt they had little choice in implementing the outcomes (39; 2) and agreed that they had to focus on the majority of the class (37; 3). Participant 7 stated "too much pressure on all children achieving is leaving aspects of

children with SEND failing. More focus must be put on the child's whole development". Participant 30 added "with an increase in testing it puts more stress on me for all children to achieve". They felt a moral obligation to fulfil the outcomes (28; 2), but believed their position was influenced by their experience (30; 2). Participant 8 said "working with children shows that progress is more important and assessments are a clear way to exclude a vast amount of children". They felt torn between their professional and personal positions (27; 3), felt pressure to try and fulfil the agenda (26; 4) and in turn, suffered occupational stress (40; 2). Participant 18 added "pressure is so intense from the government on achievement. [It] is too intense and it is felt through the whole school". Participant 21 stated "as a leader- outcomes keeps me up at night and leave me concerned about the conflicts with what I consider to be important for all children".

The group chose to place the two statements specifically related to SATs at the most extreme ends of the distribution grid. Participant 15 stated "children are more than just a statistic. 'Education' is more than government outlines, it's more than a standardised score". They strongly agreed that more emphasis is placed on SATs than any other outcomes and they strongly disagreed SATs are worthwhile for every child (42; 5; 7; -5). Participant 7 reiterated this in her report "Statutory assessments do not work for every child in education, failing to recognise all children's abilities/intelligence". Participant 27 added "children learn in too many different ways, and equally 'assess' in different ways. Standards and outcomes do not measure a child's ability or success fairly or accurately".

They do not believe that standards outcomes are inclusive. Participant 21 stated "not all children are considered or included when attainment becomes the sole objective". Many of the teachers in the group chose to focus their report comments on the negative effects of SATs on children with SEND. Participant 15 stated "children with SEND cannot access statutory tests - unfair. Can knock confidence". Participant 17 added "I feel that for children with certain needs, taking statutory tests can cause undue stress and affect mental health and can make children feel like failures, and also does not highlight the successes of the child". They do not agree that all children are considered (5; -3) or that children with SEND are focused on (3; -4). In fact, participant 18 questioned in her report whether the children were the focus at all. She went on to state that "…sometimes a test doesn't show the progress". Participant 5 stated "I feel that children should be encouraged to strive to achieve however we should not push them to achieve before they are ready just to improve data". Participant 6 added "schools have a lot of pressure to achieve standards. However, there is not much of a

contingency for SEND in a mainstream school". They do not believe they should focus their attention on those that can achieve the 'national average' (43; -4) and do not believe that children with SEND hinder the education of the rest of the class (12; -2). They agree that children with mild SEND find it easier to be included than children with more severe SEND (18; 3).

This group identified many barriers to implementing standards outcomes. They agreed that they have a lack of support from their LA (20; 2). They disagreed that they have enough funding in the school to implement the outcomes (22; -2). They also agreed that they need more time to implement the outcomes (23; 2) and that they do have enough resources to include children with SEND (13; 3). Participant 8 stated "it is unfair to test children who the government have said they understand are different in one way. The two agendas (inclusion and standards) seem to contradict…it is a constant battle to support these children within mainstream education with the resources available".

Discussion and conclusion

There are significant consistencies in the current study's findings when compared with the original study carried out almost a decade ago. There remains in these findings one group that considers there to be some flexibility and autonomy in the standards outcomes (group one) and one group that cannot see past the constraints of its outcomes (group three). Unlike Bowers (2004) who found that the teachers in his study felt they had little room to make their own decisions, a fairly consistent pattern was detected in both the original and the current study in which some teachers saw only constraint in its outcomes. However, there were three interrelated areas in which differences, or developments, were obvious when this study was compared with its predecessor.

The first area relates to the pervasiveness of the standards agenda. In the original study, the group that was able to find flexibility in the standards tended to teach in Key Stage 1. This was not the case in the present study. Despite the fact that claims have been made that changes to the National Curriculum have given teachers more autonomy to plan exciting, engaging lessons (Department for Education, 2013), the evidence from this study is that in fact teachers in the lower primary years now feel as constrained as their Key Stage 2 counterparts. It is no longer plausible to conclude that teachers can be more flexible in the

Key Stage 1 curriculum because they are not preparing children for Year 6 SATs, as the original study found. However, differences between the three groups identified in the study suggest there are important variations in the amount of constraint they feel, and (limited) autonomy they have access to, which are related to their attitudes towards the standards agenda.

The second area suggests an intensification of some of the original study's findings. The current study found that teachers hold negative positions and are frustrated by the importance placed on SATs and the narrowness of its measures. Comments that reflected criticisms in previous research of the narrow parameters of success, difficulties with the time-consuming nature of the SAT process and over-emphasis on academic achievement (Fieldings et al. 1999; Wyse and Torrance, 2009) were common. Across the groups in this study teachers emphasised that not all children can achieve within these narrow parameters of success and they chose to measure children's success in a different ways. This reflects Harnett's (2008) findings where teachers were committed to providing a broad and balanced curriculum *and* meeting children's need to be happy and to enjoy learning. This was most obvious in the strong feelings expressed about children with SEND, who were less central to the original study. In the current study, inclusion was seen much more clearly in opposition to standards. All three groups consistently stated that they did not think all children with SEND should be included in SATs and felt that their inclusion had negative effects on them. This concern with children with SEND was symbolic of a general consensus that SATs are not an appropriate measurement of success for *all* children.

Related to this is the third area to highlight: the fact that resistance to the consequences of the standards agenda, exemplified most clearly by SATs, had increased in the second study. This has been seen in recurrent, if unsuccessful, boycotts by some teachers of some of the tests during the period between the studies. In all of the groups, there appeared to be acceptance that standards-focused changes had to be implemented, but they were not necessarily prioritised by all teachers and schools. Teachers in the current study had stronger negative positions on the impact of SATs on all children, especially children with SEND than in the original study. There was also more evidence in these findings of the negative consequence of SATs for some children. Examples included emotional and mental health difficulties and children being regarded as, or feeling like, failures.

In conclusion, the findings from this study suggests that teachers are still struggling with the consequences of the standards agenda decades after its introduction (Chitty, 1989). They also suggest that, while many accept the notion of standards and accountability, the heightened neoliberalism after 2010, which has increased the emphasis on performativity, accountability and achievement in schools, has intensified their opposition to how they have been implemented. The teachers in this study valued and measured achievement and success in different ways to public-facing measures such as SATs. Reflecting wider concerns about the illusory nature of broader notions of school autonomy (Greany & Higham, 2018), there was also little evidence of the autonomy that recent curriculum changes were supposed to have introduced. There was consensus around the negative impacts of children experiencing and failing these tests. This is particularly the case for children with SEND, who seem to have suffered most from the dual neoliberal focus on marketized competition and traditional standards and their inability to play a part in the 'ritualized theatre' that Mason (2019) associates with performativity. Teachers question the validity of assessments like SATs when they are focused on such narrow parameters of success. However, it is important to note that none of the teachers stated that results of national tests should not be made public or that they should not be held accountable for achievement in their classes. Instead, their concern was for effects of the current system on the children who are being tested. There was consensus that primary education needs to place much more emphasis on ensuring the wellbeing of all children in order to move forward. This suggests that this consensus, which ranged from dissatisfaction with current standards-based policy to fairly clear opposition, has identified what Smelser (1962) called a 'structural strain' in the system, which has only increased in the period between the two studies and which is likely to create further opposition from teachers if it is not addressed.

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